

**TESTIMONY OF
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BEFORE THE
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT REFORM
SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL SECURITY,
EMERGING THREATS, AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
APRIL 5, 2005**

Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee. I appreciate this opportunity to meet with you today to discuss the recommendations of the Government Accountability Office regarding validation of anthrax detection methods.

As the federal agency most directly – and tragically – affected by the anthrax attacks of 2001, the Postal Service fully understands the value of public and employee confidence in test results for the presence of anthrax. This was an issue raised by the Government Accountability Office in connection with a 2003 hearing of this Subcommittee.

GAO recommended that the Postal Service work with other agencies and its unions to consider a number of issues related to the testing of 286 facilities in the fall of 2001. Only 23 tested positive for anthrax. We were asked to: reassess the risk level for employees and customers of the facilities that tested negative; reconsider the advisability of retesting those facilities, employing the most effective sampling methods and procedures; and, communicate our conclusions – along with our rationale – to Postal Service employees and the general public.

Following extensive review by a workgroup that included experts from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, and our employee unions, it was concluded that no further sampling was warranted for those facilities that tested negative for anthrax spores.

This decision was based on a number of factors. First, there was no new evidence of anthrax disease in postal employees or customers. Second, the Postal Service had instituted new maintenance procedures and modified work practices to reduce the potential for reaerosolization of anthrax spores. Third, that additional testing would not appreciably increase the safety of our facilities for employees or customers.

The Postal Service is continuing to improve its processes to protect our employees and our customers from biohazards in the mail. We have installed advanced biohazard detection systems at 107 facilities. Eventually, they will be installed at 282 of our key mail-processing plants.

To date, the Biohazard Detection System has performed over 550,000 tests involving more than 12 billion pieces of mail. There have been no false positives.

These automated systems, developed with the cooperation of experts from the federal government, the military and the private sector, provide rapid on-site PCR analysis of aerosol samples collected during one of the earliest stages of mail processing. They allow for quick response to a positive test result, triggering the local integrated emergency management plan which including cessation of operations and facility shutdown, notification to community first responders, including local public health officials who would make any medical decisions regarding potentially exposed employees and customers.

In addition to the Biohazard Detection System, we are installing a ventilation and filtration system designed to contain the release of biohazards as mail moves through our processing equipment.

In developing and deploying the Biohazard Detection System, we recognized the very real need for standardization of processes to produce reliable, accurate test results in which our stakeholders can have a high level of confidence.

Over the last several years, and as recently as last month, the Postal Service has been the focus of a number of events in which detection systems at other government facilities that receive mail have indicated the possible presence of a biohazard. In each of these cases, the Postal Service implemented a response plan that involved sampling and testing, operational adjustments and, where appropriate, preventive medical treatment for our employees.

Ultimately, investigation and further testing determined that the mail was not involved in these incidents and, in fact, that no biohazards were present. The initial positive alerts, however, appear to reflect the varying capabilities of detection equipment as well as sampling and testing protocols relied upon by other agencies.

Based on our experience, we agree with the Government Accountability Office's recommendation that there be coordinated interagency efforts to develop standardized processes in connection with sample collection, transportation, extraction and analysis. However – again, based on our experience – we believe that targeted sampling, rather than the probability sampling recommended by GAO, represents the most prudent and productive approach for the Postal Service.

We believe probability sampling can be of value as a sampling protocol in response to a random event. However, once mail has been identified as a potential source of contamination, it is no longer a random event. At that point, logic and responsibility dictate that sampling follow the “trail of the mail,” permitting us to conduct sampling along the path taken by the suspect mail during processing.

Probability sampling, by its very nature, might not include sampling from a specific location or piece of equipment through which a contaminated piece of mail has moved. This can create the potential for a “false negative.”

Following last month's incident at the Defense Department's Remote Delivery Facility, we conducted targeted sampling at our Washington, DC, Government Mails facility, where mail for delivery to the Defense Department is prepared. Targeted environmental sampling allowed us to focus on the areas and equipment through which this mail would have moved. While it was found that mail was not involved in this incident, it provides a demonstration of the steps we take when this type of incident occurs.

We quickly implemented a controlled shutdown of the Government Mails facility. We promptly notified employees and their unions, both at the national and local level. We continued to provide employees and unions with regular information updates until the situation was resolved. We arranged for the distribution of antibiotics to the all of facility's employees – on all work shifts – reflecting a decision made in conjunction with the Department of Health and Human Services, the Centers for Disease Control and Preventions and the District of Columbia Department of Health. We also promptly accounted for seven employees who were recorded on sick leave during the period of concern to verify that they were not exhibiting symptoms of anthrax.

Considering that incident and others like it, we believe the recommendations of the Government Accountability Office, with sole exception of probability based sampling, would go a long way in minimizing the possibility of similar, future incidents. We look forward to working with the Department of Homeland Security and other agencies to implement those recommendations.

Thank you.

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